

Green Country Veteran

A JACK C. MONTGOMERY VA MEDICAL CENTER MAGAZINE

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USS Arizona Survivor

Recalls Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor, Pacific War

Read his story on pg. 10

Green Country Veteran is the **official magazine** for Veterans who receive their care through the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center.



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On the cover: Navy Veteran Lonnie Cook, a USS Arizona survivor, recalls the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor. Read his story on pg. 10.

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Green Country Veteran

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VETERANS CHOICE

PROGRAM FACTS

As part of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA), many Veterans will now have the option to receive non-VA health care rather than waiting for a VA appointment or traveling to a VA facility.

Beginning November 5, 2014, the new Choice Program will begin to cover non-VA care for eligible Veterans enrolled in VA healthcare. Veterans are eligible if any of these situations apply to you:

- You have been told by your local VA medical facility that you will need to wait more than 30 days from your preferred date or the date medically determined by your physician
- Your current residence is more than 40 miles from the closest VA health care facility
- You need to travel by plane or boat to the VA medical facility closest to your home
- You face a geographic challenge, such as extensive distances around water or other geologic formations, such as mountains, which presents a significant travel hardship

Every Veteran will receive a letter and a Choice Card in the mail with details about the program. Veterans will be eligible for the program and receive cards in three phases:

- Veterans who may live more than 40 miles from a VA facility.
- Veterans who are currently waiting for an appointment longer than 30 days from their preferred date or the date determined to be medically necessary by their physician.
- All remaining Veterans enrolled for VA healthcare who may be eligible for the Choice Program in the future.

To set up an appointment with a non-VA provider, call the VA at 866-606-8198 and we will work with you to ensure you are approved for care in your community.

Additional Program Information

The Choice Program does not impact your existing VA health care or any other VA benefit.

If you are satisfied with your wait time at a VA facility and wish to continue waiting for VA care, there is nothing you need to do at this time.

Non-VA care is only covered by VA for medical needs which have been approved by your VA physician. We can happily schedule an appointment for other medical needs, but we can only cover the cost of care related to your VA-approved health needs. For more information or to check eligibility, please visit <http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/>.



WHAT IS

PATIENT-CENTERED CARE?

BY BONNIE R. PIERCE, MSN, RN, CENP, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF PATIENT CARE SERVICES

Patient-centered care is an essential component of an environment that empowers Veterans to achieve optimum health and well-being. As such, it involves these things:

- Care is personalized to the needs and desires of each Veteran.
- Care is proactive – anticipating things that will impact the Veteran and family.
- Care is Veteran-driven.

Personalized Care is designed to meet the unique needs of each Veteran. Although any Veteran's needs may be similar to those of another Veteran, each person's needs are as unique as they are.

The order in which needs are addressed will depend both upon the Veteran's preferences and how clinical elements combine to impact a particular Veteran. By focusing on what matters most to a Veteran, much is gained, as each success builds the foundation for future success.

Proactive Care is care that looks ahead to anticipate what is likely to happen, and prevent it if possible. For example, taking a flu shot is a proactive move. The start of influenza season is generally predictable, and taking a flu shot prepares the Veteran and their family for that potential battle just as they have prepared as service members for other battles.

Other proactive measures include getting the lab work that detects if medications are working, wearing special shoes if you are diabetic to help keep your feet healthy, and engaging in diet and exercise to help control weight, raise your energy level and increase overall well-being.

Veteran-Driven Health Care means the Veteran increasingly understands their mind, body and spirit and learns to ask for what they want and need. The Veteran works as a team with the professional staff to optimize their health. By working together, the entire team learns more about how a particular Veteran can be healed and whole.



Patient-centeredness is a part of an organizational culture that puts the Veteran first. In that culture, the environment supports Veterans, their families and the staff to inspire Veterans to their highest possible level of health and well-being.

The staff of the Jack. C. Montgomery VA Medical Center and our outpatient clinics are pleased to recommit ourselves to this endeavor, and are honored to have the opportunity to contribute positively to the life of each Veteran we serve. ★



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HELPING DISABLED VETERANS

ACHIEVE ACTIVE LIVES

STORY AND PHOTO BY NATHAN SCHAEFFER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST



Ryan Hurst poses for a photo in Iraq.

Throughout most of Ryan Hurst's life, he has been an avid runner. During his last Army Physical Test in April 2010, Hurst ran two miles in just over 10 minutes.

But his life abruptly changed two days later when an improvised explosive device (IED) ripped through his vehicle in Iraq.

"All I remember is the sound 'boom' and that's it," said Hurst, who served in Iraq for almost a year with the 739th Engineer Company. "I don't remember anything else. They said I was out for three days. I don't remember."

The blast severely damaged his left knee and he could no longer walk. For three years, Hurst underwent multiple knee surgeries and was reassigned to the Army's Wounded Warrior Program where he underwent rehabilitation.

Unable to walk without the aid of crutches, Hurst received a medical discharge from the Army.

In February 2014, Hurst met with VA staff in the Prosthetic & Sensory Aids Service, which strives to optimize each patient's health by helping them to gain more independence.

Hurst suffers from a knee flexion contraction, which doesn't allow him to straighten his leg.

"His leg is bent and stays bent at approximately 35 degrees," said John Zeeman, a VA Prosthetist. "Also, because of the traumatic injury, he was unable to support his own weight with that knee. He didn't have the manual muscle strength."

Hurst's main goal was to hold his children while standing and go on walks with his family.

"Crutches for four years are not fun," said Hurst. "I want to be able to walk

down the road with my kids or my wife. I want to be mobile. I hate sitting at home."

After Zeeman and Hurst discussed the pros and cons of different orthotic braces, Hurst decided to try a step lock brace that would straighten his leg and allow him to put weight on his leg.

The step lock function of the brace would also allow Hurst to adjust the brace and sit with comfort.

"If he wants to sit or ride in the car, he can hit the release and the joints will move without interference," said Zeeman. "He can adjust the lock release, bend the knee at any position he wants and it will stay in that position for sitting comfort."

After the brace was custom made by a company in California, Hurst started using the brace for the first time in July, and has already seen an improvement in his mobility.

"I like it," said Hurst. "They made a nice brace for me. Four years of not being able to bear any weight on it and now I'm able to bear weight."

The next step for Hurst is to strengthen his leg through normal everyday activities, which will lead to increased mobility.

"He's a pretty active guy," said Zeeman. "He's got a bunch of kids running around. He does things outside. He's already done a lot better. He's going to see how far this knee brace will take him and then six months from now, we'll consider his other options."

Zeeman said helping Veterans achieve greater mobility is a mission he takes great pride in.

"You take each individual, assess what they can do and help them with what they cannot do," he said. ★

Iraq War Veteran Ryan Hurst talks with John Zeeman, a VA Prosthetist.



PROSTHETICS RENOVATION

IMPROVES CUSTOMER SERVICE

STORY BY NATHAN SCHAEFFER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

Every day, the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (JCMVAMC) Prosthetic & Sensory Aids Service provides equipment and services to approximately 40-50 patients and sometimes as many

as 65 per day at the Muskogee hospital.

These range from items worn by the Veteran, such as an artificial limb or hearing aid; those that improve accessibility, such as ramps and vehicle modifications; to devices surgically placed in the Veteran, such as hips and pacemakers.

To meet patient demand and to improve customer service, the medical center completed a renovation of Prosthetics in June, which included the addition of two new exam rooms and increased space for product storage and office space.

Prosthetic & Sensory Aids Service provides equipment and services to approximately 40-50 patients and sometimes as many as 65 per day at the Muskogee hospital.

*Paul Lewis, a VA Orthotist, fits Korean War Veteran Charles Gay for a pair of diabetic shoes.
Photo by Nathan Schaeffer*





New slatted boards allows Prosthetics staff to customize storage space. Photo by Chris Beshears

The project also involved the renovation of current storage space to increase the number of items the service can carry. All shelving units were removed and replaced with slatted boards, which allows staff to customize the space to fit items.

“Now we’re not restricted to only being able to carry what the shelves will hold,” said Lisa Hamilton, Chief, Prosthetics & Sensory Aids Service. “We’re actually able to expand and carry items that we feel are better for the Veterans.”

The project also created a new “quick pick area,” which stores high volume items that are frequently given to Veterans. With more items in stock, the service has significantly reduced the amount of time Veterans have to wait to receive items.

“We’re actually able to expand and carry items that we feel are better for the Veterans.”

“Patients who have been using us for years are used to coming in and having to wait and wait,” said Hamilton. “Now, they come up to the window and they’re gone before they even thought about sitting down.”

The renovation has also significantly reduced wait times for diabetic shoes and most Veterans can now receive diabetic shoes the same day their provider enters a consult.

“What we’re doing is stocking shoes in the bulk of the sizes,” said Hamilton. “Our goal is to give you the shoes at the time that you come. We can’t have every single pair, but we’re expanding the amount of shoes that we carry.”

Korean War Veteran Charles Gay, who has been a Prosthetics patient at the hospital since 1955, said he is pleasantly surprised with the reduced wait time for diabetic shoes.

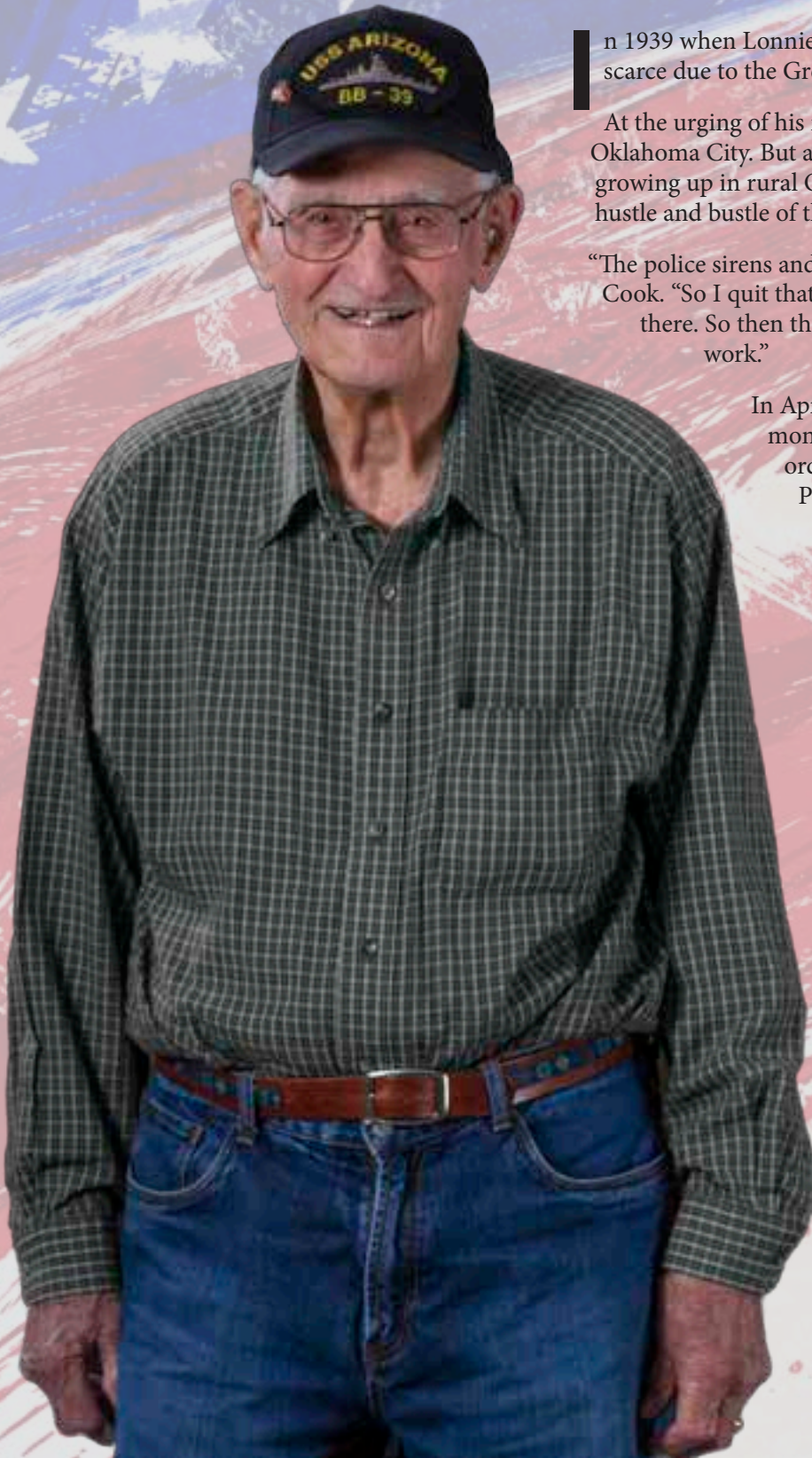
“It used to be 60 to 90 days,” said Gay. “Now, it’s almost instant. This blows my mind how things have changed over here. I’m really impressed that it’s that quick.”

JCMVAMC also has plans to renovate the Prosthetic & Sensory Aids Service Office at the Ernest Childers VA Outpatient Clinic in Tulsa. ★

USS ARIZONA SURVIVOR

RECALLS JAPANESE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR, PACIFIC WAR

BY NATHAN SCHAEFFER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST



In 1939 when Lonnie Cook graduated from high school, work was scarce due to the Great Depression.

At the urging of his mother, he enrolled at Hills Business College in Oklahoma City. But after two weeks, it simply wasn't for him. After growing up in rural Oklahoma, Cook wasn't accustomed to the hustle and bustle of the big city.

"The police sirens and the street cars kept me awake all night," said Cook. "So I quit that. I told my mother I'm not going to go back up there. So then there wasn't much left to do but join the Navy. No work."

In April 1940, Cook enlisted and completed three months of training in San Diego. Then he received orders to the USS Arizona, a battleship stationed at Pearl Harbor Naval Base in Hawaii.

"I was put on the carrier (USS) Enterprise for transportation over to Pearl Harbor to go aboard the Arizona," said Cook.

For the first six months, Cook served as a deck seaman and part of his duties included washing and scrubbing the Arizona's wooden deck.

"They put you on the deck force the first thing and you have to get up early in the morning and scrub the deck," said Cook. "There were maybe a dozen guys or so around doing it."

Then he got the opportunity to become a Gunner's Mate and was assigned to Turret 3, one of four turrets on the Arizona. His new job involved firing 1,900-pound projectiles with the ship's 14-inch guns.

"There were about 17 of us that worked there and we could sleep in the bottom of

Lonnie Cook

the turret right opposite of the powder magazines on cots,” said Cook. “We could sleep a little longer than the deck force. It was better than scrubbing the deck.”

When he wasn’t at sea, Cook got the opportunity to enjoy paradise in peace time Hawaii. One of his favorite memories is surfing the world famous waves along the North Shore.

“They had a big 10-acre place over on the North Shore and all the service people could go over there on the weekend,” said Cook. “They sold beer all the time over there except during church, 10 cents a bottle.”

“The native Hawaiians put on a dance Saturday night. It was right across the street from the ocean and you could go play in the surf. We use to get these mattress covers, swim out there and ride those breakers back in.”

DAY OF INFAMY

Shortly before 8 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941, Cook had just taken a shower and had plans to spend a day of “liberty” in Honolulu.

“I had a crap game the night before and I won \$60,” said Cook, who was 21 years old at that time. “I was going to take a friend of mine and show her Honolulu.”

Standing in front of his locker in Turret 3, he heard a rumbling in the distance.

“We didn’t think much about it,” said Cook, who is now 94 years old and one of only nine USS Arizona survivors still living.

“The chief turret captain came all the way from Chief quarters and tumbled in to the bottom of the turret and said the Japanese are bombing us.”

Cook and the other Sailors fired on the Japanese planes overhead with their 14-inch guns.

But the surprise attack by the Japanese had succeeded. At approximately 8:10 a.m., a bomb struck the Arizona, which was anchored in Pearl Harbor.

Cook said the explosion occurred approximately 30-40 yards from his position.

“I was on the shell deck where they store the projectiles,” he said. “I was on the ladder going on up when it blew up. It knocked all the lights out and it knocked a lot of things loose, projectiles loose.”

USS Arizona Battleship Specifications

SHIP NAME	ARIZONA
HULL NUMBER	BB-39
CLASS & TYPE	PENNSYLVANIA-CLASS BATTLESHIP
BUILDER	BROOKLYN NAVY YARD, NEW YORK
COMMISSIONED	OCTOBER 17, 1917
CONSTRUCTION COST	\$7,425,000.00 (HULL AND MACHINERY) \$12,993,579.23 (TOTAL)
LENGTH	608’
BEAM (MAX)	106’ 3”
DRAFT (MAX)	33’ 6”
TOTAL WEIGHT OF MACHINERY	2,462 TONS (WITH LIQUIDS)
SPEED	21 KNOTS



“We took all the people we could out of the compartments. People came out of there with so many burns, if they called me by name, I couldn’t even tell who they were.”

The ship erupted into flames and smoke came pouring into Cook’s turret.

“I went on up in the gun mount and it was smoky and the people in charge thought they were gassing us,” said Cook. “They gave the order to go out on deck and most of the machine gunning had slowed down by then.”

As the Arizona sank, Cook helped rescue as many Sailors as he could.

“We took all the people we could out of the compartments,” he said. “People came out of there with so many burns, if they called me by name, I couldn’t even tell who they were.”

With the deck of the ship almost at sea level, the order was given to abandon ship.

“We went out on deck and took life rafts down off the side of the turret and put them in the water,” said Cook. “It had sunk down about 15 or 18 feet. We had been busy and didn’t notice it.”

Of the 1,400 Sailors and Marines stationed aboard the Arizona, 1,177 were killed and the ship remains today the final resting place for 1,102.

Cook, one of the lucky survivors, spent the night in a bomb shelter on nearby Ford Island.

PEARL HARBOR TO OKINAWA

For Cook, the war had only begun. The next day, he volunteered to immediately go back to sea.

“Nobody seemed to be telling us what to do and there were eight or 10 of us out of the (Arizona) gun crew that heard they wanted people to volunteer to go on destroyers,” said Cook. “We told them that if they would put two or three of us together on a destroyer, we’d volunteer. So they agreed and I went on the USS Patterson.”

On Feb. 20, 1942, while serving on the USS Alywin, Cook took part in a raid

on Japanese-held Papua New Guinea.

“We made a raid on (Rabual),” said Cook. “It was strong enough they didn’t land troops on it during the war. Eighteen (Japanese) twin engine bombers come after us and, as they were coming in, fighters off the carrier (USS Lexington) were hitting them.”

Navy Lt. Edward O’Hare is credited with shooting down five planes during the battle and later received the Medal of Honor for his actions. Today, Chicago O’Hare International Airport is named in his honor.

“Between the fighters and the anti-aircraft fire off the ship, we shot them all down,” said Cook.

A photo of the USS Arizona after it was bombed by the Japanese.



On May 7, 1942, he then took part in the Battle of Coral Sea – the first naval battle in history where two aircraft carriers engaged each other.

“We were working with the (USS) Lexington and it got hit about 9 or 9:30 in the morning and was burning, and they got the fire put out,” he said. “Everything seemed to be alright. They started moving the convoy and there was an explosion. It got worse and worse and they couldn’t put it out. So they gave the word to abandon ship and we shot a line over and took people off.”

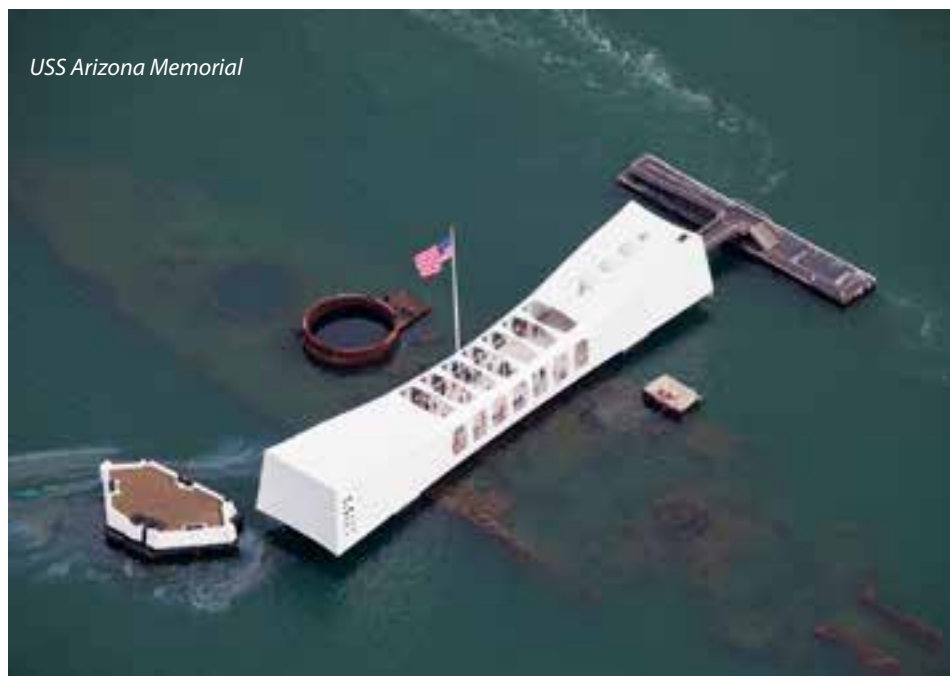
He also fought in the Battle for Midway, a turning point in the Pacific War. The Americans defeated the Japanese for the first time at sea and sunk four carriers.

After completing “Gunnery School” in Washington D.C., Cook was transferred to the USS Pringle, which was put into commission in Boston in September 1942.

“We fired star shells all night. We stayed there until that island was surrendered. I saw them raise the flag on Iwo Jima.”

The crew of the Pringle sailed through the Panama Canal and joined the Pacific War.

“We got into the Pacific in time for the Marshall Islands (Campaign),” said Cook. “We were in on the Marshalls, Guam, Saipan, Tinian and three different landings in the Philippines.”



Cook was later transferred to Charleston, S.C. and assigned to the USS Hall.

On Feb. 19, 1945, he took part in the Battle for Iwo Jima and supported Marines on the beaches.

“We fired star shells all night,” said Cook. “We stayed there until that island was surrendered. I saw them raise the flag on Iwo Jima.”

In April 1945, Cook took part in the last American invasion of the Pacific War, Okinawa, which lasted 82 days.

“We were there from day 1 to June 23,” said Cook. “There were 46 destroyers that went to Okinawa and only six didn’t get hit or sunk. We had to worry about submarines, mines and suicide planes. We got hit twice.”

When the Japanese surrendered Okinawa, Cook’s war was over and he sailed to San Francisco.

“I never had to go back again.”

Cook served in the Navy from 1940 to

1948 and left as a Chief Petty Officer. After his naval service, he married his wife, Marietta, in 1950 and worked as a welder.

In the 1990s, the Cooks moved to Morris, Okla., where Lonnie grew up, so he could hunt and fish.

When asked to reflect on the significance of being a USS Arizona survivor, Cook kept his thoughts brief.

“I think about it,” said Cook. “Yeah, I was there the first day and (for) the last invasion.”

His brief comments suit Marietta Cook just fine.

“I’m proud of him,” she said. “I really am. He is very deserving of what he has done, but he doesn’t brag about it. I’m thankful that he just keeps to himself.”

Lonnie Cook has received his health care at the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center in Muskogee, Okla. since 1994. ★

WORLD WAR II VETERAN RECALLS MILITARY SERVICE, WORK FOR NASA

BY NATHAN SCHAEFFER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

Shortly after graduating from high school in Keifer, Okla. in 1938, Robert Hutchinson decided to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps at the age of 19.

Assigned to the 8th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division in San Diego, Hutchinson was assigned to an anti-tank platoon and responsible for operating a 75 mm anti-tank field gun.

On Jan. 6, 1942, with the Nation at war, Hutchinson and his regiment sailed for the South Pacific to the Samoan islands to deter the Japanese from invading the islands.

After nearly a year of training for jungle warfare, the 8th Marine Regiment landed on Guadalcanal Island in January 1943 to reinforce American troops who had been fighting the Japanese since August 1942. A month later, at the cost of 7,100 lives, the Americans and allied troops finally captured the island from the Japanese.

After spending nearly 9 months in New Zealand, Hutchinson took part in the invasion of the Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands on Nov. 20, 1943.

Hutchinson's four year enlistment had ended the day before and he joked that Tarawa was no place for a civilian.

"My enlistment ended that morning," said Hutchinson with a laugh. "They said, 'well, just come for the ride anyhow.'"

After 76 hours of fighting, the Americans took Tarawa with 1,696 casualties while the Japanese suffered 4,690 deaths. Only 17 Japanese soldiers survived.

"It was the toughest combat that I'm familiar with," said Hutchinson, who receives his health care at the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center.

After Tarawa, Hutchinson took part in the invasion of Saipan Island in June 1944 and then the invasion of Tinian Island in July 1944.

On Tinian, Hutchinson fought across the island and was ordered to take out Japanese tanks on a hill. To reach the hill, Hutchinson's platoon would have to first cross a minefield.

"I had watched the reports and I told them there was a minefield between here and there and (an officer) said 'it's a tough war isn't it,'" said Hutchinson. "We drove through

some cane fields and missed (the mines). Our (vehicle) tracks turned out to be the highway, because everybody drove in those same tracks and nobody hit the mines."

After reaching the hill, the Japanese attacked the Marines.

"Everything was crazy," said Hutchinson. "We could fire, but we didn't know what we'd be firing at because we got there in the dark."

Hutchinson was wounded by metal fragments when an incoming mortar landed near his vehicle.

A photo of Robert Hutchinson during World War II.



A photo of the first flight of the Space Shuttle Columbia at Edwards Air Force Base. At the bottom of the photo is one of six buildings Hutchinson helped build for NASA.



“There was an explosion at the end of the half-track that caught me,” he said. “I got (fragments) in the arm and the leg. They never did remove them. They said as long as it wasn’t near a joint, it will eventually dissolve. Of all the time I spent overseas, that’s the only time I got wounded.”

After the Americans captured Tinian, Hutchinson was sent home to San Diego. For him, the war was over.

Making the Marine Corps a Career

Following World War II, Hutchinson decided to make the Marine Corps a career, and the Marines gave him the opportunity to attend a machinist school in Quantico, Va.

In 1952, with another war waging in Korea, the Marine Corps needed Hutchinson to deploy to Korea to fix American tanks that were breaking down due to the cold weather.

The Marine Corps only had 17

“It was the toughest combat that I’m familiar with.”

machinists at that time, and they worked around the clock to make new engine shafts for the tanks.

“The engines were all cooled,” said Hutchinson. “We got several tanks back in operation.”

After 10 months in Korea, he was given a new assignment as an instructor at the Marine Corps machinist school. Having excelled as a machinist and an instructor, the military asked Hutchinson to design a plotting board for top secret artillery.

“They were developing atomic shells for artillery and they needed a plotting board to do this,” said Hutchinson. “I got chosen for the job for making what they needed. They would take in

the yield and the height of the explosion and the area of devastation, and it would all be on this plotting board. At that time, it was top secret. First I had to go through the top secret deal and get cleared.”

Hutchinson said the Army took his plotting board to Fort Sill, Okla. where it was tested.

“It worked,” he said. “From there I don’t know what happened. That’s the last I ever heard of it.”

According to Fort Sill history, Army personnel fired the first nuclear-capable field artillery gun in Nevada in 1953.

Helping NASA Explore Space

Hutchinson went on to serve in the Marine Corps for 20 years on active duty and an additional 10 years in the Marine Reserve.

After leaving active duty in 1959,



Hutchinson moved back to Keifer. In 1963, Hutchinson and a business partner started the L.T. Gibbs Company in Tahlequah, Okla. which manufactured small buildings.

Business boomed and the company was earning contracts to make buildings for companies across the country, including the Wisconsin Bell, Inc.

In the early 1970s, the company won a federal contract to build six buildings for NASA to house a generator for runway lights, radar and a computer system.

“The buildings that we built for NASA were for emergency use,” said Hutchinson. “The building housed the guidance systems, so if the astronauts were unconscious when it came back into Earth, the computers in the building would guide (the shuttle) and land it.”

After the buildings were assembled, NASA equipped them with the generator and computer systems in Oklahoma City. From 1974 to 1995, NASA used the buildings at runway locations around the world.

“This is my 15 minutes of fame,” said Hutchinson with a laugh. “I’m proud of what we have done.”

Now 94 years old, Hutchinson reflected on all the world events he has witnessed since his birth in 1920 in Oklahoma.

“I have thought several times about how we went from the horse and buggy to the depression to landing on the moon in my lifetime,” he said. “It’s quite a span.” ★

“This is my 15 minutes of fame. I’m proud of what we have done.”

Robert Hutchinson at age 94

NEW CALL CENTER

IMPROVES CUSTOMER SERVICE

STORY AND PHOTO BY NATHAN SCHAEFFER,
PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

When a Veteran calls their Primary Care team to schedule an appointment, the last thing they want to do is spend several minutes on the phone waiting for someone to answer.

Through focus groups, held at the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center, Veterans have made their frustrations known.

“One of the things that we have heard from Veterans is that they have a difficult time getting through on the phone,” said Debbie Perdue, Chief of Quality, Safety & Value Service.

To identify opportunities for improvement, the medical center chartered a System Redesign Team, involving front-line staff to review the process for answering phone calls and gather data.

In the past, medical support assistants (MSAs) at each Primary Care team often juggled multiple tasks at once. In addition to answering phones and scheduling appointments, they had to check Veterans into their appointments, assist them with the self-service kiosks and make calls to Veterans to remind them of their upcoming appointments.

“The problem was that the medical support assistant had to perform all of their job responsibilities plus answer the phone,” said Perdue. “So you’re answering the phone and you have another patient in front of you, which did not provide the best customer service.”

The System Redesign Team recommended the creation of a new Call Center for Muskogee’s Primary Care Teams, along with Pharmacy. On July 14, the medical center implemented the Call Center, which is staffed by six MSAs.

The impact has been significant. In September, the Call Center answered more than 15,000 phone calls in an average time of 37 seconds. By answering calls quicker, the Call Center also reduced the number of abandoned calls from 16



Kim Patterson, a medical support assistant, answers a phone call from a Veteran in the new Call Center.

percent in June to 4.7 percent in September.

“It has improved customer satisfaction for our Veterans,” said Perdue. “We’re able to answer their call and then direct them to whoever needs to call them back. If they’re sick and need to come in today, we can get that call taken care of.”

Army Veteran Regina Barnett, who uses JCMVAMC for her health care, said the new system is a significant improvement.

“I’ve noticed a significant change,” said Barnett. “They’re answering faster and I’m getting in contact with who I need much faster. Everything goes much more smoothly with much less confusion and frustration on the part of the Veteran.”

With the Call Center answering all incoming calls, MSAs can now provide better customer service to Veterans who drop by their Primary Care Teams.

“The Call Center has also brought improved customer satisfaction to the employees because they are able to complete tasks and still provide customer service to the Veteran, which is important to the employees,” said Perdue. “It was all about trying to take care of the Veterans and the Veterans seem to like it.”

The medical center also has plans to establish a Call Center at the Ernest Childers VA Outpatient in Tulsa. ★

VA, COMMUNITY TACKLE VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

STORY AND PHOTO BY NATHAN SCHAEFFER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

For the fourth consecutive year, VA and the local community gathered at First Baptist Church in downtown Tulsa for a Stand Down for Homeless Veterans.

Held Sept. 20, the Stand Down served 265 Veterans and 132 non-Veterans, and provided food, clothing, haircuts, health screenings and laundry/showers, along with information about housing resources.

“The Stand Down gives Veterans an opportunity to come to one place and gather the resources they need to exit homelessness,” said Melanie Goldman, Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (JCMVAMC) Homeless Program Manager.

While the Stand Down was sponsored by the JCMVAMC Homeless Program, it also included services from the following community partners: Blue Star Mothers Chapter 1, Coffee Bunker, Community Service Council of Greater Tulsa, Community Voice Mail, Department of Human Services, Disabled American Veterans, John 3:16, Legal Aid Services, Mental Health Association of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Society Daughters of the American Revolution, Workforce Oklahoma, Vet Center, GI Wishes, 12 & 12, Inc., Iron Gate and Credit Counseling.

“VA is unable to tackle the problem alone,” said Goldman. “It’s such a complicated issue. We have to have the support of the community on our side and fortunately we do.”

A total of 179 volunteers from both VA and the local community donated their time to provide critical services for Veterans.



Crystal Noble, an instructor at Clary Sage College, gives Army Veteran Mack Cleveland a haircut during the Stand Down.

Students from Clary Sage College gave back by providing free haircuts.

“It makes you feel good and it makes them feel good,” said Crystal Noble, an instructor at Clary Sage College. “It’s a win-win situation. We appreciate what the Veterans do for this country and all of us at Clary Sage College just really appreciate them.”

Mary Barnett, a member of Blue Star Mothers Chapter 1, was one of several volunteers who helped Veterans find shoes and clothing.

“We take care of the troops when they’re overseas,” said Barnett. “When they come back, they need help here too. So that’s what we’re here for.”

VA nurses, students from the University of Oklahoma College of Nursing and Navy Reserve Sailors teamed up to provide health screenings and flu shots for Veterans.

Navy Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Jonathan Crabtree said he was honored to provide medical care for the Veterans.

“It means a great deal,” said Crabtree, who is assigned to the Expeditionary Medical Facility in Dallas. “We’re investing in our past and also investing in our future. These Veterans have sacrificed a part of their life for our country and some of them are still sacrificing because of an ailment.”

Veterans who attended the event were grateful to receive assistance from VA and the community.

Edward Brown, an Army Veteran who recently received a housing voucher from the HUD/Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) Program and is living in transitional housing, said he was very impressed with the Stand Down.

“This was my first Stand Down,” said Brown. “I had heard so much about it and everything I’ve heard about it has come true. I needed a pair of Army boots and I found some. It’s more than I expected.”

Mack Cleveland, an Army Veteran who is living with his daughter in Tulsa, also attended his first Stand Down and hopes to find permanent housing.

“I am impressed with all the assistance that is available for us Veterans,” said Cleveland. “I really wanted to get some clothing. They told me I could get breakfast and I had breakfast fit for a king. I don’t have the words for how impressed I am with this. This is very good.”

To learn more about VA services for homeless Veterans, please visit www.muskogee.va.gov/services/homeless/index.asp ★

REIMBURSEMENT AGREEMENTS BENEFIT NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES, VETERANS

STORY AND PHOTO BY NATHAN SCHAEFFER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

As part of an initiative to increase access to health care for Native American Veterans, the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (JCMVAMC) has signed reimbursement agreements with 28 tribal facilities and 4 Indian Health Service facilities in Eastern Oklahoma since July 2012.

The agreements include: Muscogee Creek Nation, Choctaw Nation, Pawnee Indian Health Service, Pawhuska Indian Health Service, Claremore Indian Health Service, Northeastern Tribal Health System, Cherokee Nation and Indian Health Care Resources of Tulsa.

Through funding from the VA Office of Rural Health, VA will reimburse tribes when Native American Veterans use their facilities for their health care. The agreements also allow VA and the tribes to coordinate the care of Veterans by sharing patient information.

However, Veterans must first enroll for VA health care.

"We are excited to partner with the tribes to provide health care to our American Indian Veterans," said James Floyd, JCMVAMC Director. "The reimbursement agreements will allow for better coordination of care, allows tribes and the Indian Health Service to expand care for their patients, shortens wait times for medical care, and increases access at VA facilities for all Veterans."

If the Veteran needs treatment or care that is not offered through the tribe, the Veteran will also have the option of using VA for their care.

"The Veteran does not have to come to VA for health care," said Bunner Gray, JCMVAMC Native American Coordinator. "However, if VA offers a service that the tribe does not, then the Veteran at least has the option of coming to VA if they are enrolled. The main key is providing access to care for those Native American Veterans who live in a rural community."

VA Outreach Educates Native American Veterans

The only state with more Native American Veterans than Oklahoma is California. The Sooner state has approximately 14,400 Native American Veterans, which consists of 9.3 percent of the state's population.

In Eastern Oklahoma, approximately 1,600 Native American Veterans are enrolled for health care through JCMVAMC.

To educate Native American Veterans about VA benefits, as well as the reimbursement agreements, JCMVAMC conducts outreach events at tribal health facilities.

On Aug. 15, VA staff visited the Cherokee Nation Three Rivers Health Center in Muskogee and enrolled 10 Native American Veterans for VA health care.

Navy Veteran Larry Sprague, a Cherokee Native American who receives his health care at Three Rivers Health Center, drove from Broken Arrow, Okla. to enroll after learning about the VA outreach event.

"We're getting to the age where he needs more medical attention," said Sue Sprague, his wife. "He's had some help from the Cherokee Nation which has been great. But then we started getting some phone calls about these (outreach events) with the VA and we thought, well, if he can get some help from the VA too, that's great." ★



Army Veteran Kassius Anderson (right) asks John Alley, JCMVAMC Indian Health Liaison, a question about VA benefits.

Tai Chi

helps Veterans reduce stress, increase flexibility

STORY AND PHOTOS BY NATHAN SCHAEFFER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST

For centuries, the Chinese have used Tai Chi as a martial art and means of self-defense. Today, people around the world use Tai Chi as a form of exercise to reduce anxiety and stress and to increase flexibility and balance.

Considered an alternative medicine, Tai Chi is often referred to as “moving meditation” and involves slow, deliberate movements, meditation and deep breathing. Because it puts minimal stress on muscles and joints, Tai Chi is considered safe for all ages and fitness levels.



World War II Veteran James Beal participates in a Tai Chi class at the Jack C. Montgomery East Clinic.

“Tai Chi ... helps with weight loss, back and knee problems and it’s a good way to relax as well.”

While scientific evidence does not yet support the health benefits of Tai Chi, many believe it aids in the treatment of heart disease, high blood pressure, arthritis, digestive disorders, skin diseases, depression, cancer and many other illnesses.

The Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (JCMVAMC) Behavioral Health Service offers a Tai Chi class at both the Jack C. Montgomery East Clinic in Muskogee and Tulsa VA Behavioral Medicine Clinic for Veterans who receive mental health treatment.

During the one hour class, which is held once a week, participants watch an instructional DVD and learn how to perform the 24 forms of Tai Chi.

“Tai Chi is a really good way to keep them moving and active,” said Marlene Diaz, a Peer Support Specialist who facilitates the Tai Chi class at the Jack C. Montgomery East Clinic. “It helps with weight loss, back and knee problems and it’s a good way to relax as well. It also gives them a place to come, socialize and gets them out of the house.”

World War II Veteran James Beal, who is 91, said Tai Chi has benefited him both physically and mentally.

“I wanted something to make me feel better and loosen me up because I was getting too stiff,” said Beal. “I can turn



Iraq War Veteran Karen Genn participates in a Tai Chi class at the Jack C. Montgomery East Clinic.

my neck a lot farther than I use to. It just makes me feel better since I’ve been doing it.”

Iraq War Veteran Karen Genn, who served 18 months in Baghdad with the 101st Airborne Division, said Tai Chi helps her cope with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and has helped her improve her balance.

“It’s very relaxing,” said Genn. “It calms me down. Mentally and physically, it has helped me out. I really like this class.”

While the Veterans are focused on improving their overall health, they also want to complete the 24 forms, which are performed in one seamless movement.

“They’re working towards it as a group, being able to do the 24 forms as a full

motion,” said Diaz. “We’re breaking the forms down to the most basic steps. They’re excited about it. They’ve come a long way. They help each other out and want to see each other succeed.”

To help reach her goal, Genn said she also practices at home by following online videos.

“I’m trying to work on it more at home,” she said. “I’d love to be able to do it without missing a step.”

If you are interested in participating in a Tai Chi class, please contact the Behavioral Health Service at 918-577-3699. ★

“It’s very relaxing. It calms me down.”

QUIT SODA TO PREVENT CAVITIES

BY JODIE SLOAN DDS, VA DENTIST

Did you know the average American drinks more than 44 gallons of soda every year? That's a lot of soda.

In fact, the average person drinks more than twice as much soda than milk. All sodas and other carbonated drinks are acidic and will cause cavities.

Every sip will allow acid to dissolve your teeth for about 20 minutes. Sipping throughout the day will result in continuous exposure to acids. Your teeth will get cavities and you will spend more time in the dentist chair. If this process is allowed to continue, you could even lose your teeth.

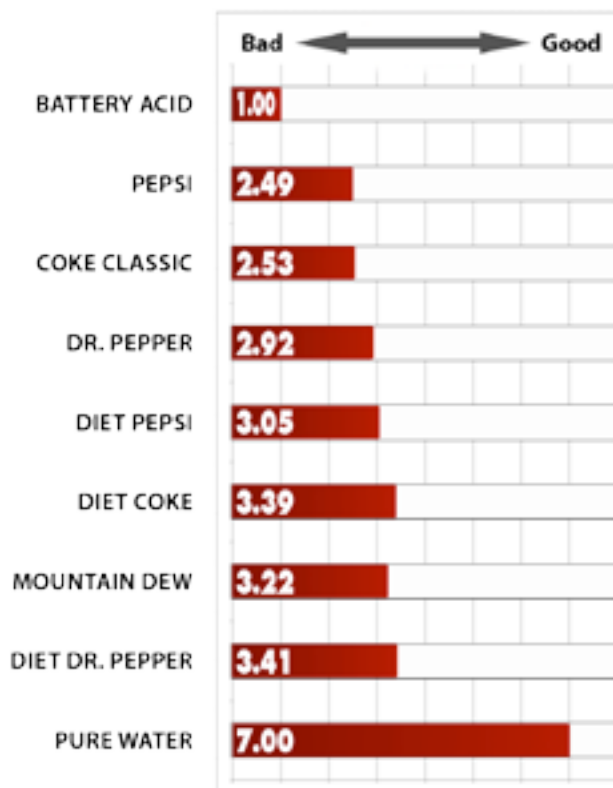
Sugars in soda are digested by bacteria and acid is released. Sugar-free sodas might have fewer calories, but even sugar-free sodas are acidic and will cause cavities at about the same as the regular version.

It is best not to drink soda at all. If you continue to drink soda, then here are a few tips:

- 1** Limit soda to meal time only.
- 2** Drink more water between meals instead of soda.
- 3** If you must drink soda between meals, rinse your mouth out with water.

Acidic Levels in Soda

In this chart below, the lower the level - the worse it is for your teeth!



PROTECT YOUR AGING EYES

BY DR. JUSTIN R. LINDSEY, VA OPTOMETRIST

Macular degeneration can be a very frightening term to hear during your eye exam, but what exactly is it? Simply stated, macular degeneration is an eye disease that can make it very difficult for you to do many day to day tasks such as watch TV, read a book or even recognize a loved one's face.

Although it is the most common cause of severe vision loss in people over age 60, most people with macular degeneration will have only mild vision loss and will maintain basically normal everyday vision. Unfortunately, about 10 to 20% of patients with the disease will suffer from a devastating loss of vision.

If you have mild macular degeneration, you may have no symptoms at all or possibly only some mild blur. You may also notice that it takes longer for your eyes to adjust when going from light to dark or that you have difficulty recognizing colors.

Signs of more advanced disease can include straight lines that appear wavy or distorted and dark or empty areas in your central vision. Fortunately, there is no pain or discomfort associated with the condition.

Risk factors for macular degeneration include being over age 50, having a parent or sibling with the disease, being Caucasian, smoking, eating a poor diet, being overweight, having cardiovascular disease and having high cholesterol.

Macular degeneration is a serious eye disease that can be detected by an optometrist during your eye exam. Most people over age 60 should have their eyes examined yearly unless their eye doctor recommends a different schedule based on his or her specific needs. Schedule your next eye exam today if you have any questions or concerns about your vision.

So, what can be done to lower your risk of losing vision due to macular degeneration?

- 1** Quit smoking if you are a smoker.
- 2** Eat a healthy diet with plenty of dark leafy vegetables, fruits, nuts and fish.
- 3** Maintain a healthy weight and exercise several times a week.
- 4** Control your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- 5** Wear a hat and sunglasses to protect your eyes from UV exposure.
- 6** Work with your primary care physician and your health care team.
- 7** Have regular eye exams and follow your doctor's recommendations.



NORMAL VIEW



**VIEW WITH
MACULAR DEGENERATION**

The Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center and Hartshorne, Tulsa and Vinita VA Outpatient Clinics served approximately 37,700 Veterans from a 25-county area in Eastern Oklahoma in 2013.



Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (Muskogee)
918-577-3000 or toll free at 1-888-397-8387



Jack C. Montgomery East (Muskogee)
918-577-3699



Behavioral Medicine Clinic (Tulsa)
918-610-2000



Ernest Childers VA Outpatient Clinic (Tulsa)
918-628-2500
or toll free at 1-888-398-8387



Hartshorne VA Outpatient Clinic
888-878-1598



Vinita VA Outpatient Clinic
918-713-5400

The Price of Freedom is Visible Here



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